

# The joys of camping

by Brenda Nichol

It's that time of the year again. Summer is here, the weather is fine, the fish are running, and everyone is looking to enjoy the great outdoors. During a summer at the Refuge headquarters, I answer hundreds of questions from people looking to get out and enjoy, not only the Refuge, but other agencies' recreational opportunities as well. I've become quite adept at giving the right information on where to go for hiking, hunting, fishing, and camping. Telling someone what campsites are available is like trying to explain where the fish are in the river at any given moment. Since I have been working here, I have noticed a few trends. Where to find a campsite on the Refuge tends to depend on the weather, on the holiday, or on the fish.

When the snow starts to melt off and last year's dead grass is starting to peek through it, the phone calls start to come in. "Where can I go camping?" "Are your campgrounds open?" "Is the ice off Hidden Lake?" "Can I make a reservation?"

The reservation question has become more and more frequent over the past couple of years. Reserving a campsite on the refuge is not a problem as there is no reservation system whatsoever. Although three of our most popular campgrounds are fee based, all of the Refuge's campgrounds are on a first-come, first-serve basis. Hidden Lake, Upper Skilak, and the Russian River (at the ferry) Campgrounds charge a fee, ranging from \$5 for a walk-in tent site at Upper Skilak to \$12 for a motor home site at the Russian River.

It seems that trying to get a campsite before or during one of the three big summer holidays is difficult, to say the least. The best advice that I, or any member of the staff, can give you is to "get there early, pay your fee and stay put." Campground hosts and rangers are available to assist you at Hidden Lake and Upper Skilak.

The Chugach National Forest however does have a reservation system and it pays to use it. You can go on line to [www.reserveUSA.com](http://www.reserveUSA.com) or you can call the National Recreation Reservation Service at 1-877-444-

6777 to get a campsite at one of the Chugach campgrounds.

Although I don't have many experiences camping out, I have enjoyed a few of the Refuge campgrounds over the years but never during any of the big holiday weekends. Like many of you, I want to get out and enjoy the summer. Up until now, all my camping has been accomplished in a tent, sleeping on the hard ground with a rock the size of a Hideout Mountain poking you in the back as you toss and turn while trying to fall asleep. You get up early because you are either freezing half to death or your back is aching from trying to sleep on that rock and you just can't stand to lie there any longer. The morning is usually cold and brisk, and once you get over the initial shock of dressing, you can step outside and enjoy the sounds of nature waking up.

It wasn't until last weekend, when I had the opportunity to go camping in a motor home, that I realized that there was something "basically wrong" with the finer side of camping. Maybe it was the noise of the generator as we fixed dinner, or the sound of the fan as it circulated overhead as we slept. I don't know. I missed hearing the sounds of nature but at least one thing remained constant, I still woke up with a sore back.

This weekend, I'll be outside enjoying a holiday weekend and, no, not from my back porch either. Unfortunately you won't see me in any of the Refuge campgrounds. I played it safe and made a reservation at one of the Chugach National Forest campgrounds. Get out and go camping even if it's in a tent, a motor home, or sleeping bag out under the stars (OK, so there aren't many stars to be seen at night during an Alaskan summer). You can't beat camping. There is so much to do and enjoy out there. Just get out and do it!

*Brenda Nichol, Refuge Clerk, has been at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since January 1989. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*